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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000390

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, PRM
HANOI ALSO FOR HCMC

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TAGS: PINS PHUM PREF PREL LA

SUBJECT: AS HMONG INSURGENT NUMBERS DECLINE, GOL UPS THE
PRESSURE

REF: VIENTIANE 360

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Since early March, Lao People's Army (LPA) forces have conducted a dry season mopping-up operation against remnant insurgents, leading to numerous civilian casualties.

Sustained military pressure in Bolikhamsai province has decimated insurgents there, with hundreds of mostly women and children either surrendering or being captured by Lao military and at least one senior insurgent leader fleeing the country. In the former Saisomboun Special Zone, the leader of what is probably the largest insurgent group has appealed to the international community to help as many as 500 women and children in his band surrender. The Lao have categorically denied reports of a massacre of 26 Hmong civilians in April, but evidence of the event is overwhelming. With the GoL keeping a tight lid on information about this conflict and our diplomatic colleagues inclined to overlook the tragedy, we believe the best hope for the many women and children living in the forest is that they can reach populated areas to turn themselves in to civilian authorities. End summary.

Bolikhamsai fighting

¶2. (C) The apparent focus of LPA efforts against the insurgency this year has been northern Bolikhamsai province, near the border with Vietnam. We have received a steady stream of reports from Hmong sources since March that the LPA, assisted by Vietnamese troops, was launching regular assaults against several groups in the Sang River valley of northern Viengthong district. These sources have reported that in late March perhaps several hundred Hmong civilians associated with insurgent leader Sinone either surrendered or were captured by LPA troops in the area. These civilians were reportedly taken to Muang Mok district in southern Xieng Khouang province, an area where many former insurgents have resettled. However, Hmong contacts in Thailand have not been able to make contact with those who were taken to Muang Mok, and their fate is unknown.

¶3. (C) One result of these attacks was the flight from the country of a senior Hmong insurgent leader, Wa Meng Yang, aka Sai Pia Yang. Yang fled to Thailand with a nephew in March or April, having been separated from his family during an LPA attack in which a number of families were captured by Lao troops. Yang reported from Thailand that a further 200-250

Hmong remained in the Sang River area, scattered in small groups. The senior commander remaining in the Sang Valley, we believe, is Sinone Sosinsay, an ethnic Lao who continues to report via satellite phone to contacts outside the country about the conditions of those remaining in the forest. Sinone reported earlier this week, for example, that on April 16 LPA troops attacked one subgroup of Hmong, killing 16, including 13 children. (Comment: Unlike the April 6 massacre, we do not have corroborating evidence of this attack. End comment.)

Saisomboun leader looks to surrender

14. (C) Separately several sources have reported to us that Moua Toua Ther, the commander of probably the largest remaining Hmong insurgent band -- about 500 people, now made up mostly of women and children -- has appealed to the international community to persuade the Lao government to permit women and children in his group to surrender. Moua made this appeal in mid-April, writing as well to the UN Secretary General. As a result of his appeal to the UN, UN

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New York has authorized the UNDP ResRep in Vientiane to raise this incident with the GoL. Subsequent conversations with Hmong sources in contact with him suggest the Hmong remain fearful they will be massacred if they try to surrender without some international observers present. This group is located south of Route 7 in southern Xieng Khouang province and the western part of the former Siasomboun Special Zone, near the site where a group of 170 women and children surrendered last June.

Vientiane massacre

15. (C) Finally, LPA forces in northern Vientiane have

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continued a campaign against scattered Hmong insurgent groups operating east of Route 13. As reported reftel (notal), on April 16 LPA troops attacked what we believe was an unarmed group of Hmong "remote people" out gathering food, killing 26, 25 of whom were women and children. This attack was part of a larger effort to eliminate the last groups still operating in the Vientiane area. News of this massacre has been widely circulated based on the accounts of survivors. We have raised it with the GoL, with the request that the government investigate the incident and, if LPA forces are found culpable, punish those responsible.

16. (C) On April 27, the Director of the MFA's newly-established Human Rights Unit told us that the incident was a "fabrication" by exile Hmong groups. We pressed hard on this, pointing out that evidence of the event was overwhelming, from multiple sources, and we were not satisfied with this categorical denial of the event. We have asked the Lao to contact appropriate military authorities in Vientiane province and in the MND to fully investigate the massacre. Ambassador has also requested a meeting with the Governor of Vientiane province, himself a former general, to discuss the killing.

Comment

17. (C) The insurgency is on its last legs. Probably some small groups will continue to hold out in the remotest corners of the country for years to come, but the days of the large, organized insurgent bands such as those visited by foreign journalists in 2002 and 2003 are numbered. The LPA's stranglehold tactic of cutting the insurgents off from food sources and launching harassing attacks have devastated the major groups. Casualties among the insurgents, mostly of women and children, are hard to gauge but we suspect number in the hundreds this year alone. Of those, probably most have died of hunger and disease, but artillery fire, occasional helicopter attacks and small arms have all taken a toll.

¶8. (C) Even as these reports gain currency abroad, the GoL continues to deny there is an insurgency or any sort of armed conflict in the Lao PDR. Remote areas of Bolikhamsai, the former Saisomboun and even Vientiane province are so cut off from the outside that this war can literally take place out of sight and mind even of the expat community in Vientiane. Just to make sure it stays that way, the GoL has limited access to some areas. For example, NGO contacts have informed us that northern Bolikhamsai has been put off-limits to their staff. Word leaks out, but without journalistic access to the embattled groups or film footage of the after-effects of the military campaign, the world's interest in this issue is limited. With no chance that the Lao government will suddenly change its tune and admit to the existence of this small-scale conflict, we believe that the best hope for those Hmong "remote people" still in the forest is to make their way to areas where they can turn themselves in to civilian authorities and seek resettlement. End comment.

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